

# More Teenagers Say No to Sex, and Experts Aren't Sure Why

By LINDA VILLAROSA

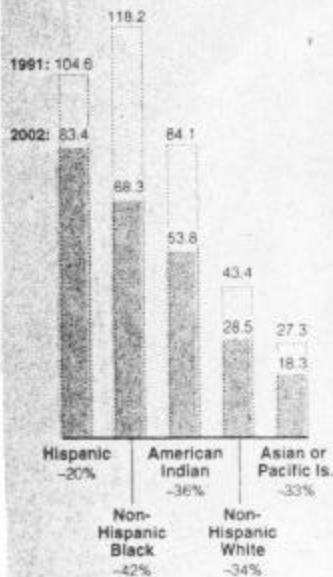
Arielle Wilcott, 17, knows the facts of life. Her mother gave her the "birds and the bees" talk for the first time when she was 13, and the two women continue an open dialogue on love, sex and relationships.

Several years ago, Arielle's junior high school in Sherman, Tex., brought in a health educator to discuss sex, sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. At the end of ninth grade, Arielle and her classmates participated in an assembly that encouraged abstinence.

Combined with what she has read, seen on television and discussed with her friends,

## Falling Birthrates

Births per 1,000 U.S. women aged 15 to 19, with percentage decreases.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The New York Times

Arielle said she believed that she had been thoroughly "sex educated." That is why she has decided to wait to have sex until she grows older.

"I don't want to be forced to take care of a child that I'm not ready for or get an S.T.D.," said Arielle, a high school senior who likes art and plans to be an animator after college.

"As far as sex," she said, "it'll happen someday, but just not today. Besides, if I came home pregnant, I'd be lying on the ground, outlined in chalk."

Like Arielle, a record number of teenagers have received the message. "Don't bring home a baby" Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in its annual tally of birth statistics, announced that the teenage birthrate had declined 30 percent over 10 years to a historic low of 43 births per 1,000. African-American teenagers showed the sharpest declines, down more than 40 percent since 1991. For young black teenagers, from 15 to 17, the rate was half, in 40 births per 1,000 in 2002 from 83.6 per 1,000 in 1991.

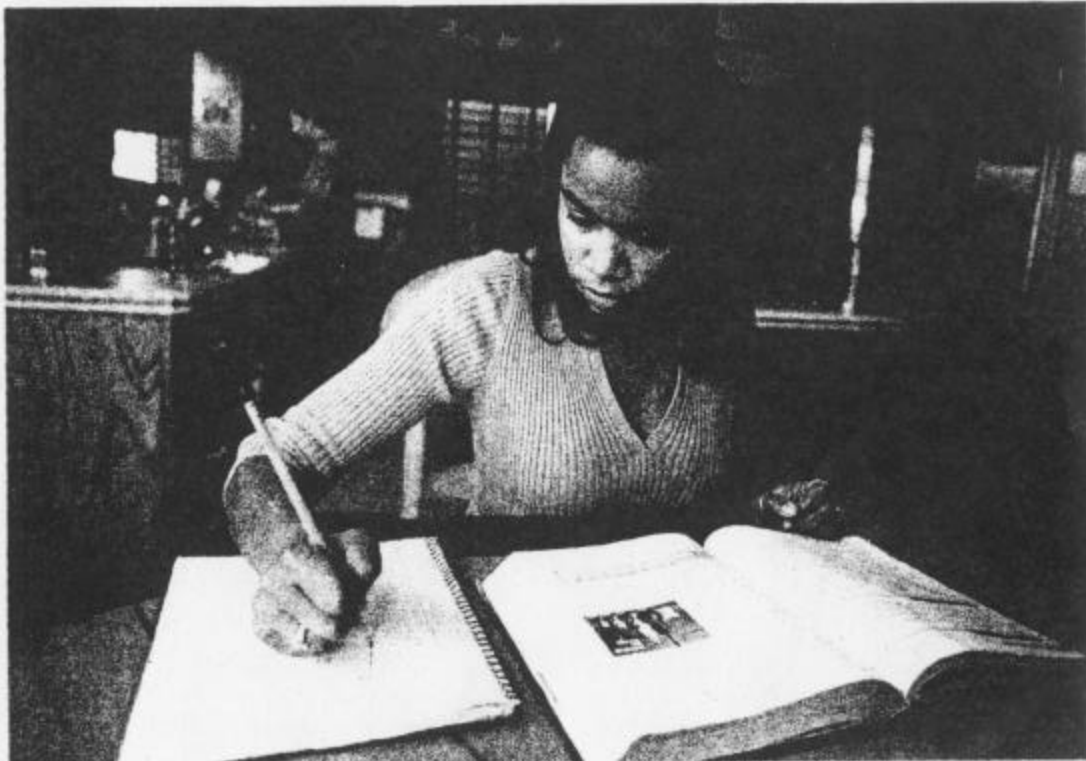
These declines, combined with a decrease in abortions among teenagers, points to a promising trend: fewer teenagers are becoming pregnant. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, in women 15 to 19, the pregnancy rate dropped from 11.5 per 1,000 in 1991 to 8.5 in 1999, the latest year with available statistics.

"When you see the abortion rate decline in tandem with birthrate, this essentially means that teenagers are being more successful in avoiding pregnancy, both that end in abortion and end in birth," said David Landry, senior research associate at the institute. It estimates that in women 15 to 19, the abortion rate declined, from 40 per 1,000 in 1990 to 24 in 1999.

Experts in the field agree that educational efforts have been crucial to reducing the numbers.

"Since 1991, when teen birthrates peaked, there's been a tremendous amount of attention focused on preventing teen pregnancy, and it has paid off," said Stephanie Ventura, the chief of the reproductive statistics branch of the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, Md., who is a co-author of the new report. "Initiatives at the state and local levels, including school-based programs, church-run, private and community have been ongoing and have really caught teenagers' attention."

Campaigns to raise AIDS awareness have



Mark Graham for The New York Times

Because of school programs and discussions, Arielle Wilcott, 17, of Sherman, Tex., says she has decided that sex is best left till later.

also helped reduce teenage pregnancy, particularly among blacks, who have the highest rates of H.I.V. and AIDS.

"Our community has had to become more forthright and willing to discuss sexual issues, because we have been so hard hit by AIDS," Bronwyn Mayden, executive director of Campaign for Our Children in Baltimore, said. "Black kids know the stats, they have seen what's happening in the community, and they are scared."

Even as advocates, health educators and, of course, parents, celebrate the good news, the debate continues over what type of sex education can take credit.

The two sides are firm.

Abstinence-only education, which the Bush administration supports, teaches that refraining from sex is the only way to prevent pregnancy and diseases. Programs that receive federal financing are not allowed to advise using contraception to reduce the risk of pregnancy or condoms to protect against disease. In 2003, the federal government devoted \$117 million to abstinence education.

Comprehensive sex education, on the other hand, teaches that while abstinence is preferable, young people need information about sex and contraception. The Guttmacher

Institute says that two-thirds of public school districts have policies to teach sex education, and that 35 percent of those require that abstinence be promoted as the sole option for unmarried people. Birth control and condoms can be mentioned just in terms of failure rates.

Arielle Wilcott says her ninth-grade workshop encouraged just abstinence until marriage, while presenting failure rates for birth control.

Rather than distributing condoms, a common practice in "safer sex workshops," the educator urged any students who had con-

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## More Teenagers Are Saying No to Sex

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doms to drop them off in a box near the counselor's office.

Two years ago, when she was 14, Addie Hughes of Columbus, Ga., signed a Why Wait contract not to have sex until marriage.

"I started hearing a lot about H.I.V. and S.T.D.'s, and I made the decision to remain abstinent so that I could keep my body safe and not have to worry about getting pregnant," said Addie, who plans to go to

college next year to study graphic design.

She is a peer educator with a group, Teen Advisors, that encourages young people to avoid sex, drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

"I believe that sex is something that needs to be kept inside of marriage," Addie said. "That's the only safe sex."

Leslee Unruh, president and founder of the Abstinence Clearinghouse in Sioux Falls, S.D., finds the trends encouraging.

"I look at these declines as evi-

dence that teenagers across the country are embracing the idea of abstinence until marriage," Ms. Unruh said. "Young people today want something more than just jumping into bed."

"These kids need to be told that there is something worth waiting for," she continued, "that they are worth waiting for."

Mr. Landry of the Guttmacher Institute disagreed about the major influences over the decrease.

"The abstinence-only movement," he said, "would like to take credit for

what we're seeing. But this decline has been going on since the early 90's, long before their movement came into political force."

He and other people point to statistics that show that teenagers are having less sex and using contraception more effectively when they do. According to the C.D.C. Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the percentage of high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse dropped.

Among girls, it fell to 43 percent in 2001 from 51 percent in 1991. For

boys, it fell to 48 percent from 57 percent in the same period.

The survey found that use of condoms among high school students rose to 57 percent from 46 percent in those 10 years.

"The only way the teen pregnancy rate has gone down is through a combination of less sex and more contraception," said Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a nonprofit advocacy group in Washington. "So both sides are making a contribution."

"There is strong support for a

clear message for abstinence for teenagers, especially young teens.

"But there is also support for good information about contraception," Ms. Brown added. "Americans don't see this as an either or."

Some people in the field credit an entirely different factor for helping drive down the pregnancy rates, the robust economy of the 1990's.

"I had a professor who said that hope is the best contraception," said Debra Hauser, vice president of Advocates for Youth, an organization that works on adolescent sexual health. "When young people have a sense of their own future, they delay sexual initiation and postpone pregnancy."

The Times Book Review,  
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